The Argument for Islamic Monotheism

Part 1 – Existence

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In the Name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful.

All praise is due to God. May He elevate the mention of His final Prophet and Messenger, Muhammad ﷺ.

This is the first article in the series "The Argument for Islamic Monotheism", adapted from an ongoing series of lectures on my YouTube channel. The series establishes concepts relating to Islamic monotheism, and is inspired by the following devotional formula of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ which was authentically reported in the hadith tradition:

{There is no god but Allah alone, without partner; His is the Kingdom, to Him is all praise, and He has power over all things.}

The series is divided into five sections, with each section corresponding to a lecture and an adapted article. The first section is on the topic of Allah's Existence, and serves as a foundational prelude to the Prophetic statement: "There is no god but Allah". It will be followed – God willing – by a second section on the topic of Allah's Oneness, which concerns the Prophetic statement: "[He is Allah] alone, without partner", a third section on Allah's Kingship, which concerns the Prophetic statement: "His is the Kingdom", a fourth section on Allah's Perfection, which concerns

the Prophetic statement: “To Him is all praise”, and, finally, a fifth section on Allah’s Omnipotence – namely the fact that His power includes and encompasses all things – which concerns the Prophetic statement: “He has power over all things”. All five statements have been mentioned in various places in the Quran, the direct word of Allah that was revealed to His Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.

In this first section/article on the topic of Allah's existence, we discuss the fact of Allah’s lordship and His creation of all things, exploring a total of four subsections. Specifically, we will (1) introduce a famous argument for Allah’s existence known as the argument from contingency, (2) define the theistic evidence from substantial origination and explain how it relates to the concept of contingency, (3) fully answer the question of whether creation ex nihilo is possible or impossible, and (4) rationalize Ibn Taymiyyah’s concept of the infinite regress of secondary causes and material conditions, distinguishing it from the impossible regress of originators, and resolving a notable paradox. Finally, we conclude by citing scriptural evidences from the Quran in order to support the interpretation of monotheism that is mentioned in the article.

Before we begin discussing the question of Allah’s existence, we ought to briefly note the following principle, which we will explore in greater detail in later articles of this series – God willing. The Islamic belief in Allah as the One True God, as fully expressed in the Prophetic statement “There is no god but Allah”, requires an acceptance of the fact that (i) He is the Creator and that therefore (ii) He is the One worthy of worship. More clearly, the Tawhid of *Rububiyyah* – which refers to the fact that Allah is the only Lord, Creator, and Maintainer of all things – necessitates the more important Tawhid of *Uluhiyyah*, the fact that Allah alone deserves

to be worshipped and that He is the only true deity and object of adoration. This clarification is important, because Tawhid should not be viewed as an abstract or theoretical exercise devoid of its entailments of worshipping Allah alone. Rather, the end goal of learning Tawhid is to *truly* become a righteous *servant* of Allah, and to *practically* dedicate one's entire life to Allah alone.

The Argument from Contingency

Moving on to the more fundamental question of Allah's existence, His lordship and His creation of all things, let us now mention one of the most powerful arguments for theism, known as the Argument from Contingency.

The Argument from Contingency begins by looking at the world around us and within ourselves and recognizing that everything in the world is dependent on external causes and conditions. For example, we need to eat and drink; we require sustenance; we need company; we need to get married; we depend on our parents when we are young and then depend on our children when they grow up. These are clear cases of dependency in the natural world – ones we directly experience. The more we look in the world, the more we recognize that everything in it is dependent on external conditions. This empirical data substantiates the first premise of the Argument from Contingency, namely: the existence of contingent things.

The argument then asserts that the entirety of these contingent things must itself be contingent. In fact, the more the contingent things that are included within the entirety of contingent things, the more the entirety

will depend on an external cause. This is because adding a contingent thing to another contingent thing does not make the two less contingent; rather, the addition renders the pair more contingent than each on their own. No matter how many contingent things are added to the set, even if the set amounts to an infinite number of successively existing contingent things, that whole entirety will be contingent on an external cause; because, as we said, the more the contingent things we add, the more the cause for the contingent things is required.

Therefore, there must exist a Cause for the set of all contingent things. And since that Cause is outside of the set, it must not be contingent, for it would otherwise be within the set. Since it is not contingent, it must be necessary – that is, it must necessarily exist and must be absolutely independent of all things.

This is the Argument from Contingency in a nutshell. The argument is sound, although there are a few issues related to the argument that deserve clarification. We will deal with these issues at a later time, God willing.

It is also worthy to note that the fact of contingency is mutually concomitant with the fact of origination, meaning that contingency cannot be true without origination and vice versa. By “origination”, we are referring to the fact that something begins to exist after it does not exist. Accordingly, the contingency of a human being entails the fact that he once did not exist – such that his substance was not there at all – after which he came into existence.

This fact that “every contingent thing is an originated thing” is a universal rule that equally applies to the universe as a whole, or, more precisely, to

the currently existing “iteration” that is the universe. More accurately, the entirety of atoms and substances that currently exists must have begun to exist after it did not, as is entailed by the fact of its contingency.

Origination through annihilation

Many people falsely believe that origination is by definition ex nihilo. They cannot conceive of any type of origination that is said to be ex materia, and instead maintain that any coherent concept of origination has to be without preceding material conditions. For this reason, because these same people see nothing coming into existence ex nihilo, they are misled into believing that the universe could be eternal and that the matter may always be there. As a result, they incline towards denying origination, and then claiming that the universe is necessary in order to maintain the mutual concomitance between origination and contingency. Put simply, they doubt the origination of the world and then doubt its contingency.

However, the world’s origination need not be ex nihilo. There exists another type of origination, specifically when a substance comes into existence, after not existing at all, in such a way that its coming into existence must be out of a preceding material condition. We’re speaking here about a third category of creation that is neither classified as ex nihilo creation nor as a rearrangement of already existing matter.

When reflecting deeply on the notion of creation ex nihilo, it becomes apparent that it refers to the origination of an entire substance without any preceding material conditions, unlike the rearrangement of matter, which involves the reconfiguration of the same things into new forms.

Thus, creation ex nihilo involves substantial origination while the rearrangement of matter does not involve any substantial origination.

Additionally, it becomes clear upon reflection that the rearrangement of already existing matter implies that the prior iteration of matter is necessary for the subsequent form to come into existence, unlike creation ex nihilo which, by definition, entails that there was no preceding material condition for the substantial origination to take place. As an example, if a tree is said to originate ex nihilo, it must be said to come into existence, after its nonexistence, without the prior existence of any material substance from which it comes to be.

Helpfully, Ibn Taymiyyah suggests that there is a third type of creation, namely origination through annihilation, or "origination ex materia". This type of origination is similar to ex nihilo creation in that the origination is substantial; the very substance comes into existence after it is not there. That said, it is similar to the rearrangement of matter in that the originated substance requires the existence of preceding material conditions, ones that are annihilated entirely at the time and place of the origination.

According to this unique view, whenever Allah creates a tree, He necessarily prepares the elements of the tree beforehand. For example, He prepares the earth and the suitable material conditions before originating the tree therefrom, substantially originating the tree while annihilating that prior material substance that served as a necessary condition for the tree to come into existence.

Hence, this third position is neither an ex nihilo creation nor a rearrangement of matter. Rather, it involves Allah bringing things into

existence after they are not there at all, though after preparing prior necessary conditions that are annihilated entirely as the subsequent effect is brought into existence. In easier terms, Allah is always bringing one thing into existence out of another thing.

Basically, the contingency of everything in the world is mutually concomitant with the fact that every part of the world must have come into existence after previously not existing, and that all the bodies of the natural world undergo substantial origination at the fundamental level. Given that the contingency of entities and their originated-ness are mutually concomitant descriptions, they can both serve as two independent evidences – that always come together – for the Divine Cause who is eternal and necessary, may He be praised and exalted.

Is creation ex nihilo possible?

Let's now move on to the interesting question of whether creation ex nihilo is possible or impossible. In the Islamic tradition, most Muslim scholars were of the view that creation ex nihilo is possible. However, there did exist a traditional view that held creation ex nihilo to be impossible. This second view is specifically the view of Ibn Taymiyyah, who is the only scholar known to have explicitly argued for the impossibility of creation ex nihilo.

Regardless of whether creation ex nihilo is taken to be possible or impossible, it is in fact unreasonable to hold that the material causes are superfluous, in such a way that something which is created out of an element can also be created without that element. This is an important nuance that should not be disputed.

Consider the example of a water molecule, which is today understood to originate from the prior elements of hydrogen and oxygen. Water – as we know it – does not come into existence without these two elements. Since water comes from hydrogen and oxygen, it follows that these two elements are necessary conditions for the existence of water as we know it. Disputing this is unwise.

That said, the early Muslims may not necessarily have believed that all the kinds of substances are originated ex materia. This is because they did not have the means to observe the initial origination of the simple elements. This early limitation in investigating the natural world allowed people to reasonably speculate that the simple elements could be a special kind of substance that is brought into existence without preceding material conditions. According to this view of creation ex nihilo, Allah commences the creation of the world by originating simple substances ex nihilo, thereafter using these necessary conditions to originate more complex and compound substances – such as animals, trees, and the many natural phenomena that originate from simple beginnings.

Such a view in regards to Allah's act of creation is a theologically acceptable one, namely that He creates the simple elements ex nihilo, and then uses them to create more complex creations, such that the simple elements serve as necessary conditions for the origination of the compound creations.

Ibn Taymiyyah once held this view of creation ex nihilo. However, he later became convinced that ex nihilo creation is impossible absolutely. The reason for this later conviction of Ibn Taymiyyah, which affirms that both the simple and the compound substances must be preceded by material conditions, was his late commitment to the view that the possibility of

substantial origination is an ontologically existing attribute, not something conceptual or mind-dependent. More clearly, if the possibility of the origination of some substance is said to be a property that really exists in the external world, then this property must be predicated of a prior substance and cannot be floating in a vacuum.

Consider a tree that originates. This origination must have been possible prior to the tree existing. Since the possibility of the origination is said to be an ontological attribute, it must be predicated of – that is, it must subsist in – something preceding the tree, namely the earth substance. The earth substance carried the potential for the tree to come into existence; it carried the possibility of its origination. Without the preceding elements of the earth, the tree cannot be possible, but must either be impossible, in which case it would not exist, or necessary, in which case it would be eternal and uncreated. In such a view of creation ex materia, Allah is perpetually preparing material conditions and originating subsequent effects into existence by His will and power.

This view of creation is much closer to the modern scientific view, for it is today understood that elementary matter particles do not originate ex nihilo. Instead, the quarks and electrons, the subatomic matter particles, come into existence out of radiation – that is, out of photons. These photons, in turn, come into existence out of energies which subsist in the surrounding bodies, such as potential and kinetic energy. Out of these energies, Allah originates photons, or light, and from the light, He originates the matter particles, namely the quarks and the leptons, and consequently the later more compound substances.

I personally believe that Ibn Taymiyyah's view should be presented as an alternative to the common view which says that ex nihilo creation is

possible. This is because it gives room for scientists who are convinced of the impossibility of creation ex nihilo to believe in the Creator, as a being who is independent of all things and the Creator of all things, who is perpetually preparing things and originating their subsequent effects.

To put it briefly, this is the argument for Allah's existence. We cannot have contingent things without a necessary being, because the more the contingent things we include within the set, the more the set will need the necessary Cause. Likewise, we cannot have an infinite number of things coming into existence and going out of existence in succession without there being an eternal Originator who brings them into existence and removes them from existence in succession. Every originated thing requires the eternal Originator, and every contingent thing requires the necessary Cause. This explanation fully answers the question of Allah's existence.

The infinite regress

It is crucial to make the following clarification in regards to the regress of material conditions. As previously indicated, the infinite regress of material conditions is not impossible according to Ibn Taymiyyah, but is instead a permissible type of the infinite regress. This is contrasted with the regress of vertical efficient causes, which was demonstrated to be impossible through the contingency argument. Recall that contingent things cannot exist alone, but must exist by a necessary Maker that causes them into existence. Similarly, the regress of creators and originators is impossible: A substance cannot be created by another substance that is in turn created by another, ad infinitum, in an infinite chain of originators.

The infinite regress of material conditions and secondary causes – such as the natural causes – is permissible specifically if the regress owes its existence to the eternal and independent Originator. Put differently, there can never exist an infinite regress of originators, but there can indeed exist an infinite regress of secondary causes that owes its existence to Allah above. Note that by "secondary causation", we are referring to the means by which Allah creates the subsequent effects.

Such a regress of secondary causes does not contradict the fact of Allah's omnipotence and His independence of all things. Allah is indeed independent of the secondary causes, for He is not assisted by them in His creation of the subsequent effects. That said, Allah's independence of the secondary causes does not imply that they are superfluous; rather, the secondary causes are necessary for the subsequent effects to take place. Allah must prepare a secondary cause or material condition in order to originate the subsequent effect, without this implying that He depends on another thing.

The independence of Allah is not compromised by the regress of secondary causes, because the regress is merely a consequence of His creative act. The fact that Allah's creation of a tree requires the creation of a suitable material beforehand is in fact equivalent to stating that Allah's creative act is conditioned on His own creative act. The later act is not assisted by the material condition, because that material condition is itself created by Allah.

Significantly, if we assume that everything in the natural world is created ex materia in this way – or, more explicitly, that each component in the chain of contingent things must come from a prior contingent thing that serves as its material condition – we will in fact have more reason to

believe in the absolute contingency of every part of the natural world. This is because something which comes into existence out of prior material is more dependent than something which comes into existence ex nihilo. If we happen to be convinced that Allah creates each and every thing out of another thing by His will and power, we will in fact have a greater appreciation of the dependence of everything on Allah than if we were to assume that Allah creates some of the things ex nihilo and without prior material conditions.

In line with this understanding, Allah says in the Quran: {Did We not create you from a fluid disdained?}. Allah also mentions in the Quran that we were created in our mothers' wombs in stages, which is one of the greatest evidences for our contingency.

Furthermore, Allah says in one of the chapters of the Quran: {Say: He is Allah, who is One! Allah, the Independent Refuge. He neither begets nor was begotten.} This verse indicates that Allah has neither an origin nor an offspring, that He is without a father or a son. Accordingly, if each thing within this contingent world is said to depend on a material origin and annihilate into something else, there will be more reason to believe that it is unlike Allah, and there will be stronger basis for appreciating its contingency and dependence on Him, than in the case of its creation without prior material conditions or out of nothing.

Straight afterwards, Allah says in the abovementioned chapter: {There is none equivalent to Him}. Allah is obviously without equal, for He is the eternal and necessary being, whereas we are all originated and dependent on His existence. We cannot exist for a moment without Allah keeping us in existence and sustaining our existence.

This concludes the first section on Allah's existence, which was intended to serve as a foundational introduction to the Prophetic statement: "There is no god but Allah". While the discussion of Allah's *Uluhiyyah* – the fact that He alone deserves to be worshipped – is essential and indeed primarily indicated by the statement above, I have chosen to postpone this discussion to the next section on Allah's Oneness. That next section will correspond, God willing, to the second of the five Prophetic statements: "[He is Allah] alone, without partner".

May Allah elevate the mention of His Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, his household, and his companions. May He send upon them His peace and His blessings.

And the last of our prayers is:

{All praise is due to God, the Lord of the worlds}.